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De gemaskerde god. Francois Haver Schmidt en het Oera Linda- boek

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Summary — The masked god.

François HaverSchmidt and the Oera Linda Book

1. The problem

The subject of this study is the so-called Oera Linda Book, an enigmatic manuscript which turned up in 1867 as an heirloom in the house of Cornelis over de Linden (Enkhuizen 1811-Den Helder 1874). Over de Linden, who worked as a shipwright at the naval dockyard in the city of Den Helder, had allegedly inherited the manuscript from his aunt Aafje from the town of Enkhuizen.

The book is presented as a chronicle, composed by Over de Linden's ancestors from c. 600 BC until 50 BC. It was written in a sort of Old Frisian and in a peculiar script which resembles runes. The book deals with the history of the Frisians from c. 2200 BC onwards. It tells of an ancient Frisian, freedom-loving civilization which was led by women and which laid the foundations for the entire white Western European civilization to come. In the course of the centuries this Frisian empire was conquered and corrupted by Phoenicians, Gauls and other tribes, peoples and nations, some of which are known from classical historical sources.

After it had been transcribed, translated and published in 1872 by the classical scholar Jan Gerhardus Ottema, as well as published in an English edition by William Sandbach (1876), this Oera Linda Book slowly revealed itself to be one of the most interesting hoaxes in the history of literature. The reason for this lies in the book itself as well as in its bizarre reception. From a scholarly point of view, the book has always been considered a forgery or a hoax, but although scholars agreed that the text was not what it purported to be, they continued to debate the exact intention and ponder the 'whodunit'. Should the book be considered an awkward forgery or a cunning hoax? What could have been the motive? No one has ever yet come up with convincing, definitive answers to these questions. In the meantime another group of readers gave credit to the text. Initially these believers came from Frisian circles, but during the twentieth century the book acquired aficionados in Nazi Germany as well as from the postwar New Age movement.

Unsolved cases like this can easily lead to legal casuistry and to the strained presentation of 'direct' evidence. In order to do justice to the case, I have instead chosen a broad cultural-historical approach. Which literary, historiographical, religious and biographic contexts render meaning and coherence to the Oera Linda Book?

2. The manuscript

Scrutinizing the manuscript and the text itself is a far better starting point, at least from a methodological point of view, than a quest for the identity of the unknown author. Which intentions and contradictions are evident in the text itself? The manuscript, now in Leeuwarden, can after all be examined, whereas the unknown author cannot be interrogated. In the first part of my study,

therefore, I went along with the fiction of the *Oera Linda Book*; i.e. I took the text at face value, while at the same time, examining those pretensions for their internal and external validity. I also placed them into a nineteenth-century cultural-historical context.

In this textual analysis I considered the following subjects in turn: external characteristics, language, literary structure, historical content, use of sources, motive and genesis. In all of these respects, the text reveals itself as extremely ambivalent. It is a bizarre mix of clumsiness and scholarship, ignorance and consideration, illiteracy and professional skill. This quality logically implies that the *Oera Linda Book*, has to be considered as an ironic hoax rather than an unequivocal forgery. In each of the respects listed, an observant, inquiring reader notices that his first impression soon needs revision. The book is not written on parchment, but on machine-made paper, dating from after 1850. It has clearly been artificially browned; when torn, the inside of the paper turns out to be white. Although to a layman the script used may resemble runes, on further consideration the letters turn out to be easily readable roman majuscules. The way in which these letters are presented reveals professional linguistic scholarship.

In a similar way the language of the book – ‘OLB-ian’ – is not what it seems to be. It is not an as yet unknown variant of Old Frisian, but rather nineteenth-century Dutch masquerading as Old Frisian. This artificial language is formed according to two basic principles, which more or less balance one another: an Old Frisian profile (in the choice and forms of words) and comprehensibility (by means of modern syntax). The author's choice to write the book in this artificial language may be understood as a parody of a Frisian purist movement at the time. Some Frisian writers from the so-called *Frysk Selskip* (Frisian Society) considered modern Frisian to be a corrupted form of Old Frisian and they subsequently tried to purify the Frisian language through the reintroduction of older forms and orthography. The ‘OLB-ian’ and this so-called ‘Iduna’-Frisian resemble one another.

The same Frisian nationalism may also have provoked the author to parody certain forms of historiography. The literary structure of the book (a frame story in which Over de Linden's ancestors function as storytellers) and the historical staging are a clear-cut parody of what is known as medieval and sixteenth-century humanist fantastic Frisian historiography. This parody does not allude to specific historical sources, as has been suggested by some, but challenges the fantastic image of Frisian antiquity that was still widespread in the nineteenth century. The parody mainly exists in crazy exaggeration of the medieval and humanist fantasies of the alleged former greatness and nobility of the Frisians. This grotesque, exaggerating character makes the book elusive because it forms an obstacle to an exact, consistent and logical interpretation.

However, this grotesque parody is also an illusion for the reader to see through – hidden behind it is a more seriously meant, religious content. The theology of the ancient Frisians, which is described at great length in the book, exclusively resembles the theological modernism which emerged

in the 1850s and 1860s, especially at the University of Leiden. A comparison of the Oera Linda Book with the views of J.H. Scholten, a leading professor of theology in Leiden, clearly reveals these resemblances. Modernism and the Oera Linda Book have in common the same image of God, the same monistic world view and the same outlook on human nature and on the development of religious consciousness throughout the history of mankind.

Not only the specifically religious passages, however, but the entire text can be understood from this viewpoint. The language in particular, the 'OLB-ian', lends itself to a plethora of double meanings concerning the central notions in the text. Free-thinking, modernist believers hide behind the Old Frisian, fighting the 'Fins' and 'Magiars' (a pun on the 'fijnen', a derogatory term for orthodox Protestants, who are said to believe in 'magic'). The book at this point refers to the so-called 'Richtingensrijd', a denominational struggle between orthodoxy and free-thinking modernism which broke out at the end of the 1850s inside the Dutch Reformed church as well as in Dutch society as a whole. Thus, in the end, once all of the reader's illusions have been punctured, the Oera Linda Book as a whole can best be characterised as an allegory of this denominational struggle, written from a modernist point of view and which uses historical parody as its vehicle.

Finally, after examining the genesis of the manuscript, I conclude that the text was produced shortly before or after 1860 and by more than one person, one of whom was an uneducated layman, namely the individual who did the final copying of the book, while another person, the editor, contributed scholarship and erudition. I also reason that the final text (now in the form of a chronicle of the Over de Linden family) was preceded by an allegorical text characterized by a greater unity of time and place. This text was subsequently cut into pieces and reassembled into the chronicle/frame story. This primal version was very probably assembled by a third contributor. To a certain extent this specific process accounts for the inconsistencies of the text as well as for the occurrence of many badly written, tedious extracts in the second half of the book.

All in all, the way in which the book is composed reveals that the authors deliberately tried to evoke a series of initial illusions of authenticity, which on closer examination would, one after another, be shattered. Almost all of the formal elements contribute towards this effect and thus the book turns out to be an avant-garde historical novel, at least as this genre was understood in the nineteenth century. In two additional respects the book is remarkably unconventional. First, because it was not composed by one author but by a consortium and second, even more unusually, because the book seems to have been deliberately corrupted in form and in content.

3. *The reception: believers and inquirers*

The intention of the author of the Oera Linda Book, as stated in the first part of this study, is at odds with the reception. The illusions were not seen through. The main reason for this lies in the efforts of the classical scholar Jan Gerhardus Ottema (Doetinchem 1804-Leeuwarden 1879). In 1870 Ottema

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literally became a 'believer' in the text, and spent the rest of his life defending its authenticity. Thus, in the process of reception the book became something quite different from what the author must have intended. Just like Ottema, many 'believers' did not perceive the illusionary, ironical, ambiguous character of the text, whilst others – the 'inquirers' – although convinced of its spuriousness, tried to identify its author but did not examine the text as a literary product.

What in the text itself had originally been connected turned out to be separated in the reception and also became associated with different social groups. The 'inquirers' were usually recruited from scholarly circles, whilst the believers were (and still are) pre-eminently to be found amongst 'laymen'. The dynamics of the debate were partly determined by the contempt which both parties felt for one each another.

Social and cultural relationships also played an important role in the reception by the 'inquirers'. By treating the text as a clumsy forgery written by Cornelis over de Linden, the text was – socially speaking – rendered harmless. Others, for example De Jong in his *Het geheim van het Oera Linda-boek* (The secret of the Oera Linda Book), opted for an interpretation of the book as a hoax written by a member of the intellectual and social elite (namely Eelco Verwijs). The discussions between both parties were coloured and determined by sentiments of honour and pride; the elite intellectuals could not accept a vision implying that one of its own members had hoodwinked them in such a manner.

The reception of the Oera Linda Book as a serious, religious text shows that over the course of time the Frisian character of the text became less important. The religious interest in the text also proves to be more frequent than is often suggested. Between the First and Second World Wars the book attracted widespread attention in Nazi Germany, and nowadays it is a much-read text in Anglo-Saxon New Age circles. Using the book as a yardstick it is possible to raise the question of the continuity between German popular science in the inter-war years and the New Age movement. Both have a similar Weltanschauung that is related to theosophy and that can also be linked surprisingly well to nineteenth-century modernist monism. A further reason for the ongoing interest in the book are a number of popular themes that feature in it: matriarchy, lost civilisations, Atlantis and also the preeminence of a northern civilisation above the classical. The 'believers' seem to sense the religious, modernist undertone of the book, without, however, doubting its authenticity. An additional explanation for this is that all non-Dutch editions are based upon Ottema's unambiguous, straightforward translation.

4. The authors

The authentication by Jan Gerhardus Ottema (Doetinchem 1804-Leeuwarden 1879) and his at times fraudulent defence of the book can only partially be explained as expressions of specific biographical circumstances or psychological characteristics. His behaviour must also be understood as a typical mix of historiographical positions and religious preferences. Ottema was a scion of a

historiographical tradition that was much more speculative than the historical-critical school which emerged in the Netherlands around 1860 and which advocated strict source criticism. This historiographical position did not preclude his belief in the book. However, for him too the religious undertone proved pivotal for his own submission to the *Oera Linda Book* as well as for the success that he achieved with it in his own lifetime. He mainly gained support among the adherents of the so-called 'Groninger Richting', a theological movement which preceded modernism.

Shortly after 1900, Johan Winkler (Leeuwarden 1840-Haarlem 1916), a doctor from the Frisian capital Leeuwarden, presented a new view on the case. He was convinced that Cornelis over de Linden had not written the book alone, as was generally assumed at that time, but that it was a joint product of François HaverSchmidt, a modernist vicar and poet, Eelco Verwijs, an archivist and librarian, and the shipwright Cornelis over de Linden. He also argued that HaverSchmidt, whom he assumed to be the main author, had written the book in order to prove, from his own modernist point of view, the spuriousness of the Holy Bible.

Winkler's views fit the results of my own textual analysis. I, too, state that more than one and probably three different individuals must have worked on the text and that the book at its core is about modernist theology. I additionally suggest that Winkler's view of the case originated from an anonymous informant from the Over de Linden family and that for this reason it may be considered to be more reliable than has usually been assumed. I take these two circumstances as an argument to support the use of Winkler's views as a hypothesis in the rest of this study.

In the three lengthy, biographical chapters of this study, I discuss the possible roles and contributions of Over de Linden, Verwijs and HaverSchmidt, respectively.

Over de Linden was a far more complex man than one would conclude from his occupation. He was a gifted, passionate autodidact who nevertheless had his limitations, a freethinker who was obsessed by the phenomenon of religion and who – in endless disquisitions – tried to rationalise away the orthodox belief that had been forced upon him in his youth. A close comparison of his writings with the *Oera Linda Book* resulted in the following conclusions. First of all it can be proved that the story Over de Linden told about the provenance of the book was a complete fabrication. Moreover, Over de Linden appears to have been too unlettered to have been able to write the book all by himself. On the other hand, he proves to have been well informed about the exact contents of the book and that means that he can be considered an accessory to the case without any reservations. Finally, the type of mistakes that he makes in his own writings prove to be similar to those made in the *Oera Linda Book* and this unmasks Over de Linden as the individual who transcribed the final copy into the OLB-ian runes. One consequence of Over de Linden's involvement, not previously stressed enough in the available literature, is the enormous scale of deception and fraud in this case. Towards Ottema, with whom he corresponded very frequently, as well as towards his

own children and towards the public at large, Over de Linden played the innocent. He probably believed in the book in his own way, not because he thought it was authentic but because he considered it to be a free-thinkers' 'bible'.

Over de Linden's lack of education caused the corruptions, mistakes and inaccuracies in the manuscript; on the other hand, the linguistic wit that also characterizes the text was probably mainly the work of Eelco Verwijs (Deventer, 1830-Arnhem, 1880). In his day he was one of the most outstanding editors of Middle Dutch texts and an analysis of his work shows that he was thoroughly acquainted with the form and content of old manuscripts. One remarkable aspect of Verwijs's expertise, I suggest, was his perception that Over de Linden's mistakes could only make the *Oera Linda Book* seem more 'authentic'.

Verwijs was a man with contradictory qualities. He was a shrewd, learned, diligent philologist and cultural historian, but with a bad character; he had a habit of insulting people and often behaved hypocritically and without restraint. This set of qualities most certainly does not exclude the possibility that Verwijs was the person who, with cunning and guile, launched the *Oera Linda Book*. For over three years, from 1867 until 1870, he pretended to have doubts about whether the manuscript was authentic or spurious, an attitude totally incompatible with his own expertise and skills. On the other hand, Verwijs's behaviour during the introduction meant that he deliberately took the risk of jeopardizing his reputation and possibly his career should the hoax ever be exposed: through his office as provincial archivist he involved the provincial government of Friesland in the affair and he also drew in his unsuspecting friend, preceptor and later superior Matthijs de Vries.

One plausible explanation for this behaviour, other than Verwijs's character, lies in the extremely intricate way that the book was launched, when compared to other forgeries and hoaxes. I suggest that the path from Over de Linden to Ottema, in the space of three years the manuscript passed through the hands of as many as five different people, covers up two different attempts to launch the book.

An important element in the co-operation between Verwijs and Over de Linden is the way they represented themselves as people with conflicting interests, by means of a correspondence that was part of the hoax. The learned Verwijs made it appear as if the simple shipwright would not yield the manuscript because of the honour of his family, whilst Over de Linden for his part represented Verwijs as lazy and indifferent. Later, when the affair had to be covered up for the sake of their careers and reputations, this same strategy could be continued.

One consequence of this cover-up is that the last of the authors named by Johan Winkler, i.e. François HaverSchmidt (Leeuwarden 1835-Schiedam 1894) was never exposed. The possibility of his authorship has never been examined systematically in the literature. Nothing is more plausible, however, than that it was he who was the instigator of the book. His literary style resembles the *Oera Linda Book* much more closely in many respects than that of

his intimate friend Verwijs. Furthermore, HaverSchmidt meets the necessary condition that, as a vicar in Den Helder, he must have known Over de Linden, at the very least as a member of his congregation.

The Oera Linda Book fits the way that HaverSchmidt's literary career developed. As a schoolboy, attending grammar school in his hometown Leeuwarden, he had already experimented with literary forms similar to the Oera Linda Book. Moreover, there are also resemblances in literary content. He had, for instance, an amazingly thorough knowledge of the ancient Frisian fantastic historiography, which was so indispensable for the realisation of the Oera Linda Book. In his published literary oeuvre, for example in the well-known *Snikken en grimlachjes* (allegedly written by his fictitious alter ego Piet Paaltjens), 'Friesland' and 'ye olde Friesland' are parodied, just as is the case in the Oera Linda Book. A comparison of a number of HaverSchmidt's texts with extracts and themes from the Oera Linda Book produced surprising results. In the Oera Linda Book, for example, I came across a caricature of the Frisian village of Foudgum, where HaverSchmidt served as a vicar from 1859 until 1862. Another text, dating from the same time, must be characterized as an allegory of the 'Richtingenstrijd', just like the Oera Linda Book.

In addition, I was also able to interrelate HaverSchmidt's modernist theological outlooks and the Oera Linda Book. One of the most striking aspects of HaverSchmidt's oeuvre is a conservative type of irony, which seems to be intended to bridge the gap between science and belief. The historical critical method, for instance, which had proved that the Frisian fantastic historiography was fiction, was at odds with HaverSchmidt's fascination with these same fantasies. The same irony was also effective in a theological respect. The desire to believe in God in a childlike, self-evident way was at odds with the modernist theology that HaverSchmidt had adhered to since his studies in Leiden. Modernism attempted to reconcile theology and natural science, and as a consequence it did not accept miracles, and it no longer considered the Bible to be God's Holy Word. Instead, it viewed nature and history as if they were riddles that God wants man to solve. These are exactly the views shared by Scholten and HaverSchmidt and which appear in the Oera Linda Book. The essence of HaverSchmidt's irony is that he considered the multiplicity and diversity of the world around him as appearances behind which an essential unity – God – was hidden. He considered it to be his duty to unmask this God in the world as well as in himself. The intention of the allegory of the 'Richtingenstrijd' is an expression of this. Behind the diversity of beliefs one has to search for the one true belief.

HaverSchmidt, I would suggest, wrote the primal version of the Oera Linda Book in Foudgum. There he, an inhibited young, unmarried, modernist vicar, served in a mainly orthodox environment. I reason that his motive for writing the Oera Linda Book lies in his awareness of this antithesis. If the public at large saw through the illusions in the book, then he would be able to step forward – according to Winkler – to tell them that the case of the Bible was no different.

After becoming acquainted with Over de Linden in den Helder some years

later, and with the help of Verwijs and Over de Linden, the book was given its definitive form. Additionally, I would suggest that the book was not yet finished in 1867 but that the second half was somewhat hastily written in the summer of 1869.

After Ottema had unexpectedly committed himself to the manuscript and therewith made it impossible for the authors to come forward, Verwijs and Over de Linden kept out of trouble by continuing to lie through their teeth. HaverSchmidt, on the other hand, mobilized his literary alter ego. When denying his involvement he used the fictitious Piet Paaltjens to bridge the gap between confession and repudiation. He thus confessed and repudiated at one and the same time. In *Snikken en grimlachjes*, the volume of poetry that was allegedly written by Piet Paaltjens, HaverSchmidt had used the very same literary device. He was Piet Paaltjens and yet he was not. Paaltjens creates an illusion of authenticity in the same way as the Oera Linda Book does, with this one difference, that although the public has always tacitly assumed that HaverSchmidt did indeed write *Snikken en Grimlachjes*, no-one ever dared to imagine that, in a similar way, he was also responsible for the Oera Linda Book.